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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study that examined the relationship between school choice and parent involvement for different ethnic groups are presented in this paper. In conjunction with a major national study of Catholic high schools, parents were asked about their reasons for school choice, type of school involvement, motivations, barriers to participation, and school satisfaction. Methodology involved surveys of a total of 1,070 predominantly low-income parents (a 60 percent response rate), interviews, and classroom observations at five innercity Catholic schools in Los Angeles, New York, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Findings indicate that minority parents' concerns, especially those of Hispanic parents, centered around the school environment. Location and discipline were major reasons for choosing a school. More involvement facilitated increased knowledge of the school; however, increased involvement did not necessarily lead to greater school satisfaction. A conclusion is that the ecology of the school is more important than instruction-related issues. Seven tables are included. (50 references) (LMI)

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Toward an Ecological Perspective on School Choice

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Abstract

Toward an Ecological Perspective on School Choice

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Given the current debate over school options and the scarcity of research reports concerning the choice behavior of poor and minority parents, we were prompted by a review of the school choice and parent involvement literatures to examine the relationship between choice and involvement for different ethnic groups.

Ethnic differences in the choice process and in parent involvement have not been examined previously. Child-rearing methods vary for each group leading to the assumption that "disadvantaged" families cannot make wise educational choices. Blau (1981) reports that Black children whose mothers have greater degrees of exposure to white parents perform better in school than do Black children whose mothers do not have as much cross-racial contact. Kohn (1969) argues that poor families do not share middle-class values concerning achievement and its concomitant values of delayed gratification, discipline, and hard work necessary for school success. Reports concerning the Alum Rock Voucher Experimentation Project in a predominantly low-income, minority community in northern California found parents more concerned about school location than about instructional programs in

choosing their children's school (Bridge, 1978; Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Cohen & Farrar, 1977). Opponents of school choice tend to cite such limitations of family process and structure in arguing against choice plans.

The arguments in favor of school choice take two related approaches. Some researchers argue that parents have diverse views about how and what their children are taught (Erickson, 1986; Maddaus, 1988, 1990; Schneider & Slaughter, in press) and that these views are consistent with their family's values and child-rearing beliefs. Some propose that public schools develop distinctive or focused identities (e.g., Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990) that allow parents to select the school that most closely fits their conception of how schooling should proceed. From such matches, they predict, greater parent satisfaction, knowledge, and parent involvement will result (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Fantini, 1973; Gratiot, 1980; Nault & Uchitelle, 1982).

Others also in favor of school choice argue that if parents could select schools, schools would become more responsive to parents' expectations, needs, and demands. As a result, they would be more likely to offer quality instruction. Parents could withdraw their children from schools with which they were dissatisfied. Ineffective schools would either reform or close (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Hirshman, 1970; Lieberman, 1989). Voucher schemes and public-school-of-choice plans are among the

most common mechanisms proposed to afford parents' choices (e.g. Catterall, 1983; Nathan, 1987; Raywid, 1987a, 1987b). Tuition tax credits similarly would expand choice particularly by allowing parents to use private schools.

Proponents of these plans press for greater parent sovereignty. They imply that if given options, parents would be able to identify what they want in a school, attend to intra-school differences, and select the school most suited to their children. For the most part, their choicemaking would be deliberative. Parents would not automatically choose a school just because it was conveniently located, particularly if it were seriously deficient compared with instruction available at other schools or at counter purposes with the ways in which parents choose to raise their children. Similarly, parents would become more knowledgeable about the schools their children attend, take a greater interest in their children's education, and forge more responsible relationships with the school leading to greater school success (Nault & Uchitelle, 1982; Paula, 1989; Raywid, 1985).

Parent-involvement studies argue that close relations between home and school are important to a child's school success. Positive home-school relations ease the transition from home to school and reduce incongruities resulting from differences found between

the home and school environments. Lightfoot (1978) recognizes the profound impact of family life on the teacher's perceptions of the child, on the child's chances for success in school, and on the parents' relationship with the school. A host of studies stresses the importance of the dynamics of the intersection between the family and the school in fostering student learning (e.g., Epstein & Becker, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Swap, 1984).

For this study we asked:

1. What are parents' most important reasons for choosing a school and how do their reasons differ by family background characteristics, especially for ethnicity? Are parents' reasons for school choice similar to the post-choice educational expectations they have for the school?

2. In what kinds of parent involvement activities are parents engaged and with what frequency? Do parents who choose schools for different reasons also differ in the kinds and amount of involvement they have? Does parent involvement differ by ethnic group?

3. What motivates parents to be involved in their children's education? What kinds of home and school barriers limit involvement?

4. What choice and involvement factors influence school knowledge and satisfaction?

In conjunction with a major national study of

Catholic secondary education (Benson, Yeager, Wood, Guerra, & Manno, 1986), we had an opportunity to examine the school choice process, parent involvement activity, and perceptions of the school for 1,070 parents, predominantly low-income, who chose to enroll their children in five inner-city Catholic high schools. Since choicemaking among the poor to attend Catholic schools is a well-established phenomenon, we felt that such a study would usefully inform the largely speculative arguments about what would happen if school options among poor and minority families became more widespread. We were also concerned about how ethnic groups differ in their choicemaking, parent involvement activities, and perceptions of the school.

We conducted surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and engaged in participant observation for two weeks at five schools representing a broad distribution of Catholic inner-city high schools. The schools are located in five major metropolitan areas--Los Angeles, New York, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that (a) the school serve a large proportion of low-income and minority families, and (b) that judged by teachers' survey responses, the school is effective in teaching such students.

A recurring theme throughout this study is minority parents' concerns about the school environment,

especially Hispanics; that is, their emphasis on location and family reasons in choosing a school and concerns about discipline. The more parents are involved in the school, the more knowledgeable they say they are about what goes on there; however, parent involvement does not necessarily lead to greater satisfaction with the school.

Of critical importance to the debate over whether to permit parents to select their child's school is how parents will go about exercising their options and whether school choice will lead to greater parent involvement. There is widespread concern that many parents will not make wise choices for their children.

This study presents a number of tentative conclusions about such parents. For example, concerns about location and discipline are more than superficial. Parents can be expected to be more involved in at-school events if they are comfortable with the school's location, the type of student body it serves, and the discipline it enforces. Location has been roundly dismissed as an important factor in school choice in an earlier study. Yet, the ecology of the school seems more important to parents than instruction-related issues.

In providing a wide range of school choice options, poor and minority parents have a better opportunity to successfully find a good fit between family and school which should be the long-term aim of effective public policy.

Toward an Ecological Perspective on School Choice

By the end of the 1990s, children from racial and ethnic minorities will constitute one-third of the school-age population. In several major U.S. cities, such children are already the majority. Yet the failure of minority students to complete high school is alarming. Fewer than 48% of Hispanics and 65% of black males graduate from high school compared to more than 75% of white males (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Research suggests that both race and class affect school failure and underachievement. Generally, children from poor families are less successful in school than children whose families have moderate or high incomes. Minority children are overrepresented in low-income settings. Yet even when income is controlled, evidence suggests that although middle-class black and Hispanic children do not experience high rates of school failure, they tend to underachieve in school.

As states, local school districts, scholars, and government leaders debate strategies for education reform, more discussion is centering on the issues of school choice and parental involvement. A part of the Bush administration's strategy for improving American schools for all children is to promote parents' choice of a school. The National Governors' Association urges governors to take the lead in establishing "a new social compact" that will allow parents to select from among public schools. The Governors' Association report, Time for Results (1986), links accountability, choice, and parent involvement as critical in defining new roles and

responsibilities needed to improve schools among educators and parents.

Given the current debate over school options and the scarcity of research reports concerning the choice behavior of poor and minority parents, we were prompted by a review of the school choice and parent involvement literatures to examine the relationship between choice and involvement for different ethnic groups. Ethnic differences in the choice process and parent involvement have not been examined previously. Child-rearing methods vary for each group, leading to the assumption that "disadvantaged" families cannot make wise educational choices. Blau (1981) reports that black children whose mothers have greater degrees of exposure to white parents perform better in school than black children whose mothers do not have as much cross-racial contact. Kohn (1969) argues that poor families do not share middle-class values concerning achievement and its concomitant values of delayed gratification, discipline, and hard work necessary for school success. Reports concerning the Alum Rock Voucher Experimentation Project in a predominantly low-income minority community in northern California found parents more concerned about school location than instructional programs in deciding the school their children would attend (Bridge, 1978; Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Cohen & Farrar, 1977). Opponents of school choice tend to cite such limitations of family process and structure in arguing against choice plans.

The arguments in favor of school choice take two related

approaches. Some researchers argue that parents have diverse views about how and what their children are taught; and that these views are consistent with parents' values and child-rearing beliefs (Erickson, 1986; Maddaus, 1988, 1990; Schneider & Slaughter, in press). Some propose that public schools develop distinctive or focused identities (e.g., Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990) that allow parents to select the school that most closely fits their conception of how schooling should proceed. From such matches, they predict, greater parent satisfaction, knowledge, and parent involvement will result (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Fantini, 1973; Gratiot, 1980; Nault & Uchitelle, 1982).

Others in favor of school choice argue that if parents could select schools, schools would become more responsive to parents' expectations, needs, and demands. As a result, they would be more likely to offer quality instruction. Parents could withdraw their children from schools with which they were dissatisfied. Ineffective schools would either reform or close (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Hirschman, 1970; Lieberman, 1989). Voucher schemes and public-school-of-choice plans are among the most common mechanisms proposed to afford parents' choices (e.g., Catterall, 1983; Nathan, 1987; Raywid, 1987a, 1987b). Tuition tax credits similarly would expand choice, particularly by allowing parents to use private schools. Such credits, however, would benefit primarily middle- and upper-middle-income parents rather than the poor, some of whom do not earn a sufficient income to pay taxes.[1]

Proponents of these plans press for greater parent

sovereignty. They imply that if given options, parents would be able to identify what they want in a school, attend to intra-school differences, and select the school most suited to their children. For the most part, their choice making would be deliberative. Parents would not automatically choose a school just because it was conveniently located, particularly if it were seriously deficient compared with instruction available at other schools or at counter purposes with the ways in which parents choose to raise their children. Similarly, parents would become more knowledgeable about the schools their children attend, take a greater interest in their children's education, and forge more responsible relationships with the schools directed toward their children's academic successful (Nault & Uchitelle, 1982; Paula, 1989; Raywid, 1985).

Parent-involvement studies argue that close relations between home and school are important to a child's school success. Such relations ease the transition from home to school and reduce incongruities that separate home and school. Lightfoot (1978) recognized the profound impact of family life on the teacher's perceptions of the child, the child's chances for success in school, and the parents' relationship with the school. A host of studies stress the importance of the dynamics of the intersection between the family and the school in fostering student learning (e.g., Epstein & Becker, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Swap, 1984).

Nault and Uchitelle (1982) speculate that parents who choose their children's school are more knowledgeable about it, more likely to find the school approachable, more satisfied with the

school, and assuming their sentiments are positive, more likely to communicate to their children a greater sense of membership in the school community.

A Study of Secondary-School Choice and Parent Involvement

In conjunction with a major national study of Catholic secondary education (Benson, Yeager, Wood, Guerra, & Manno, 1986), we had an opportunity to examine the school-choice process, parent-involvement activity, and perceptions of the school for 1,070 parents, predominantly low-income, who chose to enroll their children in five inner-city Catholic high schools. Since choice making among the poor to attend Catholic schools is a well-established phenomenon, we felt that such a study would usefully inform the largely speculative arguments about what would happen if school options among poor and minority families became more widespread.[2] We were also concerned about how ethnic groups differ in their choice making, parent-involvement activities, and perceptions of the school.

We conducted surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, and engaged in participant observation over a two-week period at each school.[3] Over 60% of parents returned our surveys, largely due to the cooperation, persistence, and interest of the school's administrators and teachers and the rapport that grew among school personnel, students, and researchers during our stay at the school.

The schools we studied are located in five major metropolitan areas--Los Angeles, New York, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that

(1) the school serve a large proportion of low-income and minority families and (2) that judged by teachers' survey responses, the school is effective in teaching such students. With one exception, the schools are located in declining industrial or neighborhood communities. One school is located in a gentrified area of an important city; however, none of the students live in that neighborhood but travel to it from the city's most notoriously downtrodden and crime-infested section. When the archdiocese announced its decision to open this school for poor-achieving students in a former seminary residence, panic seized the quiet, all-white, upper-class neighborhood. A lawsuit resulted that was soon dropped after the residents witnessed the excellent behavior of the students. This school was typical of the schools in this study in that its specific mission was to accept large numbers of poor students who academically and economically could not obtain admission to more affluent Catholic high schools but whose parents wanted them in Catholic schools.

With the exception of one school with a slight majority enrollment of neighborhood white students from working-class families, the communities from which students attended these schools were far flung. It was typical to find students who commuted three or four hours a day by public transportation.

School populations ranged from three that were ethnically diverse to two that were predominantly black. The black schools had a wider income range and a higher median income than the other three schools.

The families we studied are consistent in their demographic features with the assessment of the evolving structure of minority and poor families and the communities in which they live. However, they are not typical of the discouraged poor who may lack the incentive to seek out schooling options (Wilson, 1987). Less than 50% own their own housing; 30% live with other families or in government subsidized housing; half are single-parent families; the average number of adults and children in the family is four; 40% are not Catholic; half the responders, mainly mothers, have a high school diploma or lower level of educational attainment; the average family income is less than $20,000, with 32% earning at or below the federal poverty level for the year in which the data were collected ($10,000 for a family of four in 1985); and nearly 90% are nonwhites, primarily black and Hispanic families.[4]

The most common feature of the parents in this study is the high value they place on education. They have extraordinarily high expectations, not differentiated by income or education levels, that their children will succeed. Their expectations are differentiated, however, by ethnic background. The vast majority of parents (72.2%) respond affirmatively to questions of whether they expect their children to obtain a bachelor's degree. Of that group, 42.3% expect their children to obtain an advanced degree such as a master's, Ph.D., or law degree. Hispanics (44.4%) and blacks (45.2%) are significantly ($\chi^2 = 61.86878$, $DF = 12$, $p < .0001$) more likely than whites (22%) to expect their children to obtain advanced degrees indicating their strong belief in the value of

education in choosing these schools.

If financial sacrifice is a useful behavioral measure of "value of education" as argued by Lee (1987), then these parents' high expectations are somewhat understandable. The average family in this study spends 18% of its disposable income on tuition, based on a calculation of school costs. In addition, parents at all the schools are expected to participate in fund-raising activities such as purchasing raffle tickets, paying for books and school uniforms, and shouldering transportation costs. They expect a high return on their investment. As told to an interviewer by a black student: "My mother has the attitude that she is not going to pay so much money so I can mess around in [private] school. She says she works hard for it [money], and she does not expect me to go out and louse up."

Limitations

Obviously, this research is limited by a very small although representative data base for Catholic schools of this type. While its findings cannot be generalized to all schools of choice, they do support a number of ideas about the interaction between school choice and parent involvement that would be difficult to speculate on without such data. Again, the data are suggestive and are not to be regarded as conclusive.

Major Findings

Factors Influencing Choice

What are parents' most important reasons for choosing a school, and how do their reasons differ by family background

characteristics, especially for ethnicity? Are parents' reasons for school choice similar to the post-choice educational expectations they have for the school?

Pre-choice selection criteria. We asked parents to indicate the importance of 25 reasons influencing their choice of a Catholic high school. We then asked them to select the one "most important" reason. Twenty-two of the reasons items were analytically and statistically categorized into five basic reasons constructs (Table 1). Parents' reasons varied significantly (X^2 = 50.78712, DF = 8, $p < .0001$) by ethnicity. Blacks were the most likely to choose academic and curriculum reasons (59.7%), whites more likely than either minority group to cite religion and values reasons (31.9%), and Hispanics were more likely to prefer location and family reasons (12.3 percent) and discipline (20%), although academic and curriculum reasons were the most prominent reason for all groups.

Insert Table 1 about here

Hispanics stand out in that nearly a third of parents, or twice as many as in the other two groups, cite either location and family or discipline as the most important reason for choosing the school. In developing the location and family construct, we included these items: school safety, other family members attending the same school, transportation, location, the positive influence of other students on the child, and the openness of the school to parents' ideas. The latter item we interpreted as relating to a

particular comfort level with the school or at least a perception of potential congruence with the home environment. Discipline was measured by a single item.

We investigated the relationship of a host of family background factors, including income, education, single-parent status, employment of the mother, number of children in the family, and religion on parents' most important reason. With the exception of the slight influence of education on selecting an academic or curriculum reason for choosing the school and the influence of being Catholic on religion and values reasons, there were no significant relationships. Interestingly, Hispanics as well as members of the other ethnic groups who cited location and family or discipline reasons as the most important ones in choosing a school were not differentiated by other family background characteristics, including income and parents' level of education. Seventy-six percent of parents reported that location was important, 98% said discipline was important; however, only 35% reported that location was "very important," whereas 85% said that discipline was "very important" in choosing a school.

Evidently, while not quite as important as discipline, location is an important construct in choosing a school for all types of parents in this study, but especially for Hispanic families, who value close family ties and by extension a close relationship with the school. Moreover, the realization that discipline is important for accomplishment may also motivate these parents in their choice of a Catholic secondary school.

While there were ethnic differences, in a school-by-school analysis we found a high positive correlation among parents in their reasons for choosing the school that differed by school (Bauch & Small, 1986). Expectedly, these tended to conform to the school's pattern of ethnic enrollments. For example, the two schools with large Hispanic enrollments had a similar pattern. Schneider and Slaughter (in press) argue that differing choice patterns are related to different schools and not necessarily to parent characteristics, suggesting a kind of community cohesiveness. While a certain confounding of the data is apparent here, the suggestion that ethnicity plays a role in school choice cannot be ignored and may be a necessary condition for school choice. Parents are concerned about their children's educational environment as well as about the school's academic quality (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Maddaus, 1988). Location and discipline play a large role in determining what that environment will be like in terms of the ethnic composition of the student body and the way the school maintains its behavioral norms.

In their discussion of public and Catholic school differences, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) hypothesize that Catholic schools are more likely than public schools to provide social networks and social cohesiveness based on the notion of a functional community. They define functional communities as those in which "the norms, the social networks and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up" (p. 36). Children acquire "social capital" that apparently has the benefit

of strengthening ties between families and schools in ways that influence student achievement despite social background.

Thus, parental expectations and parent involvement can be strongly influenced by family-school interaction when families and schools function as a cohesive community. This argument can be tested by examining parents' educational expectations of the school, especially as they may differ by ethnic group. In this vein, then, we might expect Hispanic families to emphasize the school's social and community goal orientations.

Post-choice educational expectations. As evidenced in their responses to a list of 13 educational goals or expectations of the school that we collapsed to represent four goal orientations, there were no significant differences among the ethnic groups or other family background characteristics (Table 2). Surprisingly, Hispanics were not more likely to choose social and community goals as "most important," although those goals are conceptually related to location and discipline reasons for choosing the school (e.g., building community among faculty, students, and parents; developing high moral standards and citizenship). Families may differ in their primary reasons for choosing a Catholic school; however, once in the school, they share a common diversity: parents want it all (see Goodlad, 1984). They are concerned about the developmental aspects of adolescent growth rather than academic quality exclusively. While there is a tendency for blacks and Hispanics to emphasize academic expectations, even among these groups a majority of parents cite a different goal orientation as their most

important expectation for the school. Ethnicity is an important factor in parents' pre-choice selection criteria, but not for parents' post-choice expectations. What parents expect of schools is not distinguishable by family background. Once families become a part of the school environment, racial and ethnic values and differences tend to blur.

Insert Table 2 about here

This conclusion leads to the question of parents' level of involvement in the school and whether it is distinguishable by ethnic background, importance of location, and other factors. Since schools play a large role in the extent to which they offer opportunities for parent involvement, parent involvement may be more dependent on the school than on family background.

Levels of Parent Involvement

In what kinds of parent involvement activities are parents engaged and with what frequency? Does parent involvement differ by ethnic groups?

We asked parents to indicate the kinds of parent involvement activities they participated in over a school year. For this study, we conducted our analyses to indicate parents' levels of involvement. Schickedanz (1977) classified parent activities in schools into one of three levels of involvement as they affect the teacher's role as "expert" and the decision-making role of school staff members. She considers the activities such as attendance at

parent-teacher conferences and school meetings that do not challenge the expertise of the teacher or the decision-making power of the school as Level One, or low parent involvement. Level Two includes the presence of parents and their participation in the educational setting as aides or chaperons where control is maintained by the teacher and school. Level Three, or high parent involvement, includes activities that involve parents in teaching their children and making decisions concerning educational policy by serving on committees or boards. In progressing from Levels One through Three, parents move from a more passive to a more active role, and the school exerts less and less control (see Cervone & O'Leary, 1982).

For Level One participation activities, approximately 80% of all parents say they are involved in two of the three activities cited--attending school meetings and monitoring homework (Table 3). Blacks are somewhat more likely to help at school ($\underline{X}^2$ = 17.10401, $\underline{DF}$ = 2, $\underline{p}$ < .0002) than Hispanics or whites. This gives blacks a greater opportunity to monitor the school and to know what goes on there.

Insert Table 3 about here

For Level Two communication activities, we asked parents the number of times they spoke with their child's teacher during the school year and who usually initiated such contacts. Again, blacks are the most frequent communicators with teachers ($\underline{X}^2$ = 96.21767,

DF = 8, p < .0002); however, Hispanics are about as likely as blacks to initiate school contacts and do so at about the same rate as teachers contact them (X^2 = 35.84752, DF = 6, p < .0001). Over a third of minority parents are aggressive when it comes to involving themselves in their children's school progress. Whites appear to be the most passive in both the frequency with which they talk to their children's teachers and in initiating contacts. Interestingly, teachers appear to initiate contacts with whites more frequently and probably with greater ease due to ethnic similarity.

Level Three decision-making activities consist of the proportion of parents who serve on some type of school governance committee or board, the extent to which parents feel they "advise or help make decisions for this school," and whether parents would like to advise the school. The two latter constructs include 16 items indicating an array of decision-making areas from hiring and firing teachers to influencing what subjects are taught.

While Hispanics report less involvement in participation (Level One) and communication activities (Level Two) than blacks, they are just as likely as blacks to say they advise or help make school decisions. Only 46.7% of parents say they advise the school in at least one decision-making area. Generally, this is in the area of "ways the school and parents work together." However, of those who say they do not advise the school, when asked if they would like to help make school decisions in at least one area, approximately 80% of nonadvising parents agree. In descending

order, these parents were the most interested (1) in advising the school in the area of school policy and goals such as determining admissions policies and setting standards for student behavior (71%); (2) in the area of personnel such as hiring and firing of teachers and administrators (55.9%); (3) in the area of home-school relations (54%); (4) in the area of finances such as how the school budget is spent and how money is raised (48.1%); and (5) in the area of curriculum, such as what subjects are taught and the selection of textbooks (30.2%). With the exception of home-school relations and curriculum, the nonadvising parents in the two minority groups are significantly more likely to want to participate in school decision making than whites in the areas of personnel (X^2= 31.62297, DF = 2, $p < .0001$), finances (X^2=6.63735, DF=2, $p < .04$), and school policy and goals (X^2=13.14367, DF=2, $p < .002$) (not shown).

While only 12.5% of parents serve on school governance committees, whites are significantly less likely than blacks or Hispanics to do so (X^2=9.64145, DF=2, $p < .01$).

We developed an overall parent involvement score to identify parents involved in three or more kinds of participation activities by summing parents' responses to all the participation items. As expected, blacks had the highest proportion of involvement activities with 60.9%, followed by Hispanics (51.1%) and whites (48.3%) (X^2=34.12169, DF=22, $p < .05$). Only about 11.4% of parents report that they are not involved in any participation activities.

In this study, blacks also had the highest levels of education

and income. We tested all the parent involvement variables against the set of family characteristics previously described. Only parents level of education had a positive influence on one parent involvement item--frequency of talks with the child's teacher.

While parent involvement levels are moderate, nearly all perceive that they are involved in some way, primarily in monitoring their children's homework, attending school meetings, and talking with their children's teacher one or two times a year. It would appear that parents are the most concerned about monitoring their child's academic progress and work cooperatively with teachers in this respect. They also want to make decisions, particularly about school admissions and standards for student behavior. In choosing these schools, parents are primarily concerned at this third level of involvement about the kind of environment that promotes student growth and academic learning. They would like to have more say about who is admitted to the school and student behavior. Blacks stand out in this group, especially regarding their presence in the school. Presence is a way of influencing the environment. In this way, blacks may be able subtly to influence school decisions.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

We tested parents' involvement motivations by asking them to respond to items that represent five types of "barriers" to parent involvement. We were particularly interested in tapping into parents' "delegation" beliefs, that is, whether they believed "that it is the job of the principal and the teachers to run the school."

For this analysis (Table 4), the most common barrier across all groups was "conflict with my working hours" (63.4%). Hispanics (51.7%) were significantly less likely than whites (64.2%) and considerably less likely than blacks (68.5%) to cite working hours as a barrier ($\underline{X}^2$= 22.82669, $\underline{DF}$=2, $\underline{p}$ <. 0001). From our visits to the schools, we became aware that many Hispanic mothers were on welfare, giving them more flexible hours for coming to the school. However, Hispanics were more likely than other groups to cite language differences and attitudes of the principal and teachers (35.7%) as preventing their involvement in school activities ($\underline{X}^2$= 80.84890, $\underline{DF}$=2, $\underline{p}$ < .0001). Given their lower rate of participation and communication, whites (39.7%) expectedly were the most likely to believe in handing responsibility over to the school. Blacks (20.5%) were the least likely to believe that "it is the job of the principal and the teachers to run the school" ($\underline{X}^2$=24.07189, $\underline{DF}$=2, $\underline{p}$ < .0001).

Insert Table 4 about here

The picture drawn here is one of aggressive participation and strong beliefs about accountability on the part of minority groups in involving themselves in their children's education and in the school, as much as the school will permit. Given the high number of parents who want decision-making responsibility, it would appear that these schools do not involve parents in governance matters as much as parents would like. Considering that blacks are the least

likely to be Catholic, they seem well-integrated into the functional community of the Catholic school setting. Whites appear to have a higher level of trust in the school and thereby are more passive in their participation than minorities, pointing again to the determination of these latter parents in helping their children succeed in school.

Factors Influencing School Knowledge and Satisfaction

At issue in arguing the merits of choice plans is parent responsibility and accountability. Nault and Uchitelle (1982), whose study was of middle- and upper-middle-class whites in a town called Collegeville, found that parents who were active choosers in locating a school for their children knew more about their child's school than parents who were passive in their choice of a school, usually sending the child to the closest, most convenient school. Similar issues are evident with this group of middle- and lower-middle-class minority parents.

We asked parents, "How much do you feel you know about what goes on in your child's school?" Blacks (34.8%) and Hispanics (38.4%) were significantly more likely than whites (22.7%) to say they knew "a great deal" ($\underline{X}^2$= 10.03626, $\underline{DF}$=4, $\underline{p} < .04$). Most whites said they felt they knew "a moderate amount" (68.9%). The majority of whites in this study lived in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the school, whereas the blacks and Hispanics commuted long distances. Some of these schools were previously all-white schools and had long family traditions wherein many of the teachers had taught the parents of the white students.

Evidently, these kinds of parents do not feel they need to know very much about what goes on at school, assuming that if they need to know, they will be told by the school, as indicated by the high number of contacts initiated by teachers for whites. Also, the whites are Catholic and have a tradition of choosing Catholic schools. Perhaps their loyalty contributes to a certain passivity about their children's education and keeps their expectations for their children and the school at about the same level as their parents had for them.

A by-product of school choice is the opportunity to forge a satisfactory match between home and school. If parents choose schools for particular reasons and have expectations about what schools ought to do, a satisfactory match could be identified by knowing parents' perceptions about a number of school characteristics and how those perceptions relate to their school-selection concerns.

We asked parents to specify the emphasis they thought their children's school placed on a number of school-related issues: homework, discipline, teaching of religion, teaching of sensitive issues such as sex education and evolution, social-justice issues such as helping the poor, emphasis on liberal as opposed to conservative political and feminist views, and minority representation in the curriculum. Parents had an opportunity to choose "too much," "too little," "about right," and "I don't know."

As indicated in Table 5, overall, parents exhibit high levels of satisfaction. However, all groups without distinction are the

least satisfied with the emphasis the school places on "minority representation in the curriculum." Discipline, religion, and social-justice issues in the curriculum contribute the most to ethnic-group differences.

Insert Table 5 about here

White parents (83.3%) are significantly more likely to say that discipline in the school is "about right" compared to the minority parents (X^2=7.38736, DF=2, $p < .03$) indicating the concerns of these parents for a disciplined environment. Similarly, whites are the most satisfied with the school's emphasis on religion (82.5%), X^2=10.83410, DF=4, $p < .03$) and blacks (70.1%) are the least satisfied with the school's emphasis on social-justice issues (X^2=18.48457, DF=4, $p < .001$). For these and other items where parents are dissatisfied, the overwhelming criticism is that the school does not place enough emphasis on an issue. For none of the items did more than a handful of parents say the school emphasized something "too much." However, in the range of issues presented, parents confess to not knowing whether a particular issue is emphasized. The "I don't know" responses ranged from a high of 58.6 percent for "conservative political beliefs" to a low of 3.1 percent for "homework."

We did not find any differences for knowledge and satisfaction related to family-background characteristics such as education, income, and family composition. Ethnic differences suggest that

minority parents are accountable in that they are knowledgeable about the school and what goes on there. In choosing these schools for their children, they appear reasonably satisfied with the match obtained between home and school, what they want for their children and what the school provides.

Linking Parent Involvement and School Choice

A recurring theme throughout this study is minority parents' concerns about the school environment, especially Hispanics; that is, their emphasis on location and family reasons in choosing a school and concerns about discipline. In a reexamination of parents who said location and family reasons were very important in choosing a school, we were able to uncover some interesting but not unexpected relationships.

We wanted to know if parents who chose the school for location and family reasons were involved in the school in ways different from those who did not emphasize the importance of location and family. Moreover, we thought that the more parents were involved, the more satisfied they would be with the school, as measured by our question on school-related issues. Also, we thought perhaps that this satisfaction was facilitated or enhanced by location. Leitch and Tangri (1988) find that junior high school parents frequently cite the school's unsafe and unfamiliar neighborhood location as a reason for not attending school meetings and teacher conferences. Nault and Uchitelle (1982) speculate that increased familiarity with the school enhances home-school relations. Maddaus (1988) argues that location is related to the kind of

environment parents want for their children congruent with their child-raising values. If parents are able to obtain a suitable match between home and school by exercising school choice, they are more likely to be comfortable with the school, more at ease in it, more willing to come to the school, and more satisfied with what the school offers.

Table 6 indicates the percentage of parents who are involved in selected parent involvement activities for those who responded that location and family reasons were "very important" in their choice of a school for blacks, whites, and Hispanics versus those who said location was "not important" or "somewhat important." We used only parents' responses to items concerning attending school meetings (Level One), communicating with their children's teachers (Level Two), and helping advise on school matters (Level Three). In order to qualify for this analysis, parents had to have indicated that they attended school meetings and communicated with their children's teachers three or more times a year. Since only about half the sample said they helped advise, we included all those parents in the Level Three analysis.

Insert Table 6 about here

It is not surprising that overall, parents who say that location and family reasons for choosing the school are "very important" are somewhat more likely to attend school meetings frequently (26.9%), compared to those for whom location is not as

important (19.5%). Consistent with earlier patterns, whites (13%) are significantly the least likely to increase their attendance at school meetings based on the importance of location in choosing a school (X^2=7.10028, DF=2, $p < .03$). While the comparisons between the two groups based on importance of location are not great, there is some indication that location is important for minority groups' attendance at school functions.

Communication, or talking with teachers more than three times a year, does not seem to be influenced by location as a preference for school choice. Consistent with earlier patterns, for both comparison groups, blacks stand out in the frequency of their communication. In contrast, Hispanics (9.8%) appear to communicate less with their children's teachers based on the importance of location. Even the choice of location may not overcome the language barrier cited earlier.

We examined levels of parent-involvement activity for the other five school-choice reasons and for family-background characteristics discussed earlier. With the exception of the tendency for more highly educated parents to choose academic reasons and also to communicate more frequently with their children's teachers, we did not find any relationships for location other than the one described. It seems school location is important in parents' attendance at school meetings. Communication with teachers and giving advise to the school are dependent on other factors not requiring a parent's presence at the school. Parents frequently communicate with teachers by phone and letter.

The schools solicit parents' advice through school newsletters and surveys.

For communication activities, then, the school needs to be the more active partner in responding to parents and providing opportunities for them to express their voices and thus gain greater sovereignty.

Parent Involvement, Knowledge, and Satisfaction

In a final set of analyses (Table 7), we determined that the more parents are involved in the school, the more knowledgeable they say they are about what goes on there; however, parent involvement does not necessarily lead to greater satisfaction.

We developed a scale range in which "low" involvement means three or fewer than three involvements in school meetings and communicating with teachers; "moderate" involvement means three or more involvements in attending meetings or communicating with teachers; and "high" means three or more involvements in both attending meetings and communicating with teachers.

Insert Table 7 about here

Parents who reported infrequent or no involvement were more likely to say they know very little (74.4%) about the school compared to those who are not involved and claim to know a great deal (46.8%). Similarly, almost twice as many parents who were moderately involved (41.9%) say they know a great deal about the school compared to those (24.4%) who say they know very little. As

expected, those who are the most frequently involved are ten times (11. 3 percent) more likely to say they know a great deal compared to those who say they know very little (1.3%) ($\underline{X}^2$=28.00076, $\underline{DF}$=4, $\underline{p}$ < .0001).

We examined the educational-issues questions and compared them to frequency of parent involvement and found no significant relationships. This could be related to some confounding of the data in which a high proportion of parents admitted to not knowing about a particular curriculum emphasis but still state that they know "a great deal" about what goes on in the school.

Discussion

Of critical importance to the debate on whether to permit parents to select their child's school is <u>how</u> parents will go about exercising their options and whether school choice will lead to greater parent involvement. There is widespread concern that many parents will not make wise choices for their children.

This study presents a number of tentative conclusions about such parents.

First, concerns about location and discipline appear to go far deeper than previously surmised. Parents can be expected to be more involved in school events if they are comfortable with the school's location, the type of student body it serves, and the discipline it enforces. In earlier studies, location has been roundly dismissed as an important factor in school choice. Policy makers need to give practical consideration to school location including student body mix and discipline; and researchers need to

probe extensively the multiple meanings parents attach to "school location."

The well-known Alum Rock Voucher Experiment, (Bridge, 1978; Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Cohen & Farrar, 1977), poorly designed and executed, dealt a crushing blow to the view that poor parents can make wise educational choices (Bauch, 1989). In the context of Kohn's limited views on the socioeconomic bases of child-rearing, Bridge (1978) concluded that poor and minority parents have an "information deficit" and select schools for their children based on criteria that are not "legitimate." The legitimacy-of-criteria claim resulted from two important facts: (1) that the parents were not the primary decision makers concerning their participation in the voucher plan, and (2) they feared they would be denied access to their neighborhood schools (Cohen & Farrar, 1977). Parents were very concerned about school proximity, safety, and the distance their children might be required to travel to take advantage of the different types of instructional programs offered.[5] The project planners were not as sensitive as they might have been to the primacy of family values and sovereignty in determining the configuration of factors that connect home and school and work best for a particular family.

In discussing school location, it is pertinent to note that Catholic parents who send their children to public schools give "location" as the primary reason they no longer choose Catholic schools (Greeley & Rossi, 1966; Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1978). Furthermore, Catholic parents now give less importance to

religion, discipline, and values as reasons for school choice than they gave a decade earlier. In their relocation from the inner city to the suburbs, Catholics are not willing to send their children back to the schools they patronized earlier. One might surmise that many of these parents found satisfactory public schools for their offspring in the suburbs; and that these parents' values and child-rearing practices no longer match those of the neighborhood families they left behind.

Second, in linking school choice and parent involvement, we have tried to suggest that parents seek a good match between what they want for their children and what the school provides. While parents' reasons for choosing a particular school community may differ initially, once in the school, parents are singularly concerned that their children take advantage of what the school expects. Parents who choose schools instinctively know the importance of a positive school environment.

In providing a wide range of school choice options, poor and minority parents have a better opportunity to find a good fit between family and school, which should be the long-term aim of effective public policy.

A major assumption of the current educational reform movement and its emphasis on school autonomy or local control is that for most of the school families, the school matches their child-rearing expectations and their child's needs and abilities and that parents experience a positive school environment. In the school reform literature, the notion of an appropriate school placement is

generally not acknowledged. By acknowledging this notion, it is possible to construe how choice and parent involvement are related.

Toward an Ecological Perspective

An ecological perspective is useful in assessing a student's functioning in the school setting, the family, and the broader community. For example, the norms, values, and behaviors of family members who are recent immigrants, including those who move from one part of the country to another, are often in conflict with the school and community settings. Black students sometimes play leadership roles in family and church settings where they are supported and respected, but are treated as poor learners in school (Jackson, 1988). Furthermore, black students are often confused if teachers become indignant when their questioning behaviors result in a lack of student response. For some students, the form of teachers' questions and therefore their meaning, differ significantly from the questioning behaviors of the students' parents (Heath, 1982). When roles and behaviors are diametrically opposed, emotional stress inevitably results leading to school failure and other problems. The impact of overlapping systems on minority youth cannot be overestimated since they have the potential to nullify one another in some important aspects of socialization and education.

As Cremin (1976) notes, there is an obvious "inescapable relationship between the concept of the configuration of education and the concept of the community." Communities act as mediators to obviate external and often conflicting influences. In the past,

the primary alternative configuration was the mutual support found in the relationships among the common school, the white Protestant church, and small-town America. Today, however, this traditional configuration has given way to other configurations in an increasingly pluralistic society. These alternatives are difficult to locate and identify but no less important in the education of youth. A vital role for schools is to strive constantly to strengthen the connections between home and school and for professional educators to view their role as assisting parents in their child-rearing responsibilities.

Community and location are important concepts in thinking about development as the main purpose of education. Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) argue that development is the proper aim of education and cannot be limited to intellectual aims. Development as an educational goal combines intellectual, social, and personal aspects of growth. It is related to what Dewey (1938, 1963), Bronfenbrenner (1979), Hamilton (1984), and others meant by it: the increasing ability to understand and act upon the environment. It would seem parents have this notion about education in mind when they choose their children's school and participate in it.

Maddaus (1988) argues that location as a reason for school choice is an ecological variable. It represents the link between choice and involvement. It acknowledges cultural differences and the need for a compatible environment--one that is sensitive to, understands, and respects cultural and family differences. Community without choice is incompatible. If there is mutual

selection, the chosen community can more readily require its members to be involved, and the members, being more at ease, are more likely to respond. The power of the community to educate is unmistakable.

Educators and school policy-makers need to operate from a firm conviction that when parents are properly informed about a school and when their location, family, and value preferences are respected, they can become effective partners with the school in decision-making responsibilities about their children's educational future. School choice is the ultimate stage of parent involvement because it balances accountability between home and school.

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Notes

1. The state of Wisconsin is currently experimenting with a limited voucher plan in which low-income parents receive $2,500 if they select to attend a private, nonreligiously-affiliated school. To date, fewer families than were expected are making use of this plan.

2. Nationally, 23 percent of Catholic school enrollments are minority students and 14.3 percent are nonCatholics. These proportions double and triple in the largest U.S. archdioceses from which this sample was drawn (Brigham, 1990).

3. For a fuller discussion of these research efforts, see Bauch, P. A., Blum, I., Taylor, N., & Valli, L. (1985). Final report to the National Catholic Educational Association on a field study of five low-income-serving schools. Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America; Bauch, P. A., & Small, T. W. (1986). Parents' reasons for school choice: Their relationship to education, income, and ethnicity. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction ED 298 650); Bauch, P. A. (1989). Can poor parents make wise educational choices? In W. L. Boyd & J. G. Cibulka (Eds.), Private schools and public policy: International perspectives. New York: The Falmer Press; and Bauch, P. A. (1991). Linking reasons for parent choice and involvement for minority families in Catholic high schools. International Journal of Educational Research, 15, 311-322.

4. In New York, the Hispanics were primarily of Puerto Rican origin, whereas in Los Angeles they were primarily Mexican. Subanalyses did not reveal any substantial differences concerning the questions explored in this chapter for these two Hispanic subgroups.

5. For a critical assessment and excellent discussion of these issues in connection with the Alum Rock Project, see Maddaus (1988).

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Table 1

Parents' Most Important Reason for School Choice by Ethnic Group

Reasons	Ethnic Group			
	White	Black	Hispanic	Total
Child's Choice	5 4.4%	46 9.2%	18 7.7%	69 8.1%
Location/Family	9 8.0%	34 6.8%	29 12.3%	72 8.5%
Discipline	7 6.2%	49 9.8%	47 20.9%	103 12.2%
Religion/Values	36 31.9%	72 14.4%	30 12.8%	138 16.3%
Academic/Curriculum	56 49.6%	298 59.7%	111 47.2%	465 54.9%
Total	113 13.3%	499 58.9%	235 27.7%	847 100.0%

Table 2

Parents' Most Important Goal Expectation for the School by Ethnic Group

Goal Expectation	Ethnic Group			
	White	Black	Hispanic	Total
Academic	29 26.9%	185 38.5%	98 43.0%	312 38.2%
Social/Community	32 29.6%	100 20.8%	46 20.2%	178 21.8%
Vocational	20 18.5%	107 22.2%	46 20.2%	173 21.2%
Personal/Religious	27 25.0%	89 18.5%	38 16.7%	154 18.8%
Total	108 13.2%	481 58.9%	228 27.9%	817 100.0%

Table 3

Most-Involved Parents by Ethnic Group

Involvement	Ethnic Group			
	White (N=120)	Black (N=615)	Hispanic (N=280)	Total (N=1,015)
Level I (Participation)				
Help at School*	38 31.7%	246 40.0%	73 26.1%	357 35.2%
Attend School Meetings*	94 78.3%	492 80.0%	210 77.1%	802 79.0%
Monitor Homework**	100 83.3%	503 81.8%	212 75.7%	805 80.3%
Level II (Communication)				
Talk with Teachers*	19 15.9%	241 39.9%	35 12.5%	295 29.4%
Parent Usually Initiates Talks+	24 23.1%	214 39.0%	86 35.2%	324 36.1%
Teacher Usually Initiates Talks+	57 54.8%	187 34.1%	83 34.0%	327 36.5%
Level III (Decision Making)				
Serve on Committees+	6 5.2%	84 14.9%	28 10.5%	118 12.5%
Advise School+	43 37.1%	281 48.9%	135 49.3%	459 47.6%
If Not, Would Like to Advise+	80 77.7%	435 84.6%	212 80.3%	727 82.5%

Percentage of parents responding "Three or More Times ...
* Yearly"
** Weekly"
\+ % Responding "Yes"

Table 4

Barriers to School Involvement by Ethnic Group

Barriers	Ethnic Group			
	White (N=135)	Black (N=594)	Hispanic (N=271)	Total (N=1000)
Conflict with Working Hours	86 64.2%	407 68.5%	140 51.7%	633 63.4%
Delegation Beliefs	52 39.7%	121 20.5%	80 29.5%	253 25.5%
Lack of Transportation	39 28.9%	113 19.2%	72 26.6%	224 22.5%
Child Care	38 29.0%	112 19.0%	69 25.5%	219 22.1%
Attitude/Language Differences	38 29.5%	62 10.6%	96 35.7%	196 20.0%
Total	253 16.6%	815 53.4%	457 30.1%	1525 100.0%

Table 5

Distribution of Parents' "About Right" Responses to Emphasis School Places on Selected Educational Issues by Ethnic Group

Educational Issues	Ethnic Group			
	White	Black	Hispanic	Total
Religion	99 82.5%	460 74.8%	213 76.1%	772 76.1%
Sensitive	98 81.7%	452 73.5%	217 77.5%	767 75.6%
Homework	89 74.2%	460 74.8%	205 73.2%	754 74.3%
Discipline	100 83.3%	456 74.1%	197 70.4%	753 74.2%
Social Justice	94 78.3%	431 70.1%	226 80.7%	751 74.0%
Political	81 67.5%	390 63.4%	184 65.7%	655 64.5%
Minorities in the Curriculum	70 58.3%	355 57.7%	155 55.4%	580 57.1%

Table 6

Comparison of Importance of School Location to Selected Parent Involvement Activities by Ethnic Group

Involvement Activity	"Not or Somewhat Important"				" Very Important"			
	White	Black	Hispanic	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Total
Attend School Meetings 3+	6 9.7%	62 21.3%	25 20.0%	93 19.5%	6 13.0%	77 30.9%	33 24.1%	116 26.9%
Communicate with Teachers 3+	10 15.6%	136 44.3%	20 15.4%	166 33.1%	8 15.7%	104 37.5%	14 9.8%	126 26.8%
Advise School	23 37.1%	150 51.0%	63 48.8%	236 48.7%	18 36.7%	121 46.4%	70 49.6%	209 46.3%

Table 7

Comparison of Levels of Parent Involvement to School Knowledge

	School Knowledge		
	Very Little	Moderate Amount	Great Deal
Low	58	336	153
	74.4%	60.3%	46.8%
Moderate	19	172	137
	24.4%	30.9%	41.9%
High	1	49	37
	1.3%	8.8%	11.3%